DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 744 IR 058 000

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TITLE Literacy, Libraries & IFLA: Recent Developments and a Look at the Future.
PUB DATE 2000-08-00
NOTE 8p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference: Conference Proceedings (66th, Jerusalem, Israel, August 13-18, 2000); see IR 057 981.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla66/papers/021-139e.htm.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Foreign Countries; International Organizations; International Programs; *Library Associations; *Library Role; *Library Services; *Literacy; Literacy Education; Public Libraries
IDENTIFIERS Association Role; *International Federation of Library Associations

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the plans of the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) Section on Reading for keeping the literacy issue alive within IFLA and for moving ahead with specific programs and projects. The first section provides historical background on IFLA's involvement with literacy from 1989 to the present. The second section looks at ways that libraries might become involved in literacy, including providing collections in support of literacy, actively participating in instructional programs for learners, and providing support services for literacy efforts by the library and other organizations. The third section describes recent activities of the IFLA Section on Reading, including conference sessions, workshops, articles and columns on literacy in the section's newsletter, and a plan to develop guidelines for libraries in promoting literacy activities. (MES)

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IFLANET Search Contacts
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
Annual Conference

66th IFLA Council and General Conference

Jerusalem, Israel, 13-18 August

Conference Proceedings

ED 450 744

A.L. Van Wesemael

Code Number: 021-139-E
Division Number: VII
Professional Group: Reading
Joint Meeting with:
Meeting Number: 139
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

Literacy, Libraries & IFLA: Recent Developments and a Look at the Future

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Abstract

In the past decade educators and librarians have become increasingly concerned about literacy-both the problem of illiteracy and the need to improve and promote literacy among those who already can read. In 1996, IFLA established a Literacy Working Group to recommend what actions IFLA should take regarding literacy. The Working Group's report and recommendations were presented in 1999 and turned over to the IFLA Section on Reading for consideration as part of its Action Plan for 2000-2001. This paper traces IFLA's previous involvement with the issue of literacy, summarizes portions of the IFLA Literacy Working Group's 1999 report, and presents the Section on Reading's immediate plans for promoting literacy and literacy programs in libraries.

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Paper

Introduction

At the 1999 IFLA conference in Bangkok, IFLA's three-year-old Literary Working Group submitted its final report and recommendations to the IFLA Professional Board. In her report covering the years 1997-1999, Professional

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Board chair Sissel Nilsen announced that in the future the Section on Reading, working with other groups, would "have responsibility for literacy questions-a theme that might well be one of IFLA's core activities in the future." The Working Group was disbanded and the Professional Board turned the report and its recommendations over to the Section on Reading for incorporation, as we saw fit, into our Action Plan for 2000-2001.

This paper addresses the Section on Reading's plans for keeping the literacy issue alive within IFLA and for moving ahead with specific (if limited) programs and projects. First, however, I want to provide you with some historical background and context for the Section's approach to the topic.

IFLA and Literacy

Several forces converged between 1989 and 1995 to put literacy on IFLA's agenda. In 1989, IFLA sponsored a pre-conference in Paris on the topic of public libraries and the illiteracy problem. The next year the IFLA Public Library Section participated in a pre-conference in Sweden on literacy and the role of the public library.

To focus world attention on the problem of illiteracy, the United Nations declared 1990 as International Literacy Year, and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was designated as the lead agency. The two principal messages International Literacy Year presented to the public were: 1) education and literacy were essential to the well-being of society; and 2) literacy and education were the responsibility of all sectors of society, not only schools and professional education. In 1990 the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Bank, and other international organizations sponsored the Education for All conference in Bangkok. The background papers on education and literacy did not mention libraries or the potential role that they might play in the campaign to eradicate illiteracy. IFLA and the American Library Association decided to send Lucille C. Thomas, an American school library leader, to the conference to represent libraries and their interests. Her report on how libraries could be "partners in meeting basic education needs" was submitted to IFLA and distributed at the 1991 conference in Moscow.

Literacy was the topic of an IFLA pre-conference seminar held in India in 1992 prior to the 58th general conference in New Delhi. Lucille Thomas presented a paper that was published in the IFLA Journal in 1993 under the title "World Literacy and the Role of Libraries." She provided an overview of developments around the world since 1990, focusing on the question "What Can Libraries and Librarians Do in the Literacy Effort?" In general, her answers-all valid today--focused on developing and interpreting collections, especially for new adult readers; cooperating and collaborating with literacy and literacy-related organizations; helping educate the public about literacy problems; creating and supporting family literacy programs for preschool children, and encouraging school libraries to reinforce basic literacy instruction by bringing children and books together.

Also in 1993 UNESCO published "Guidelines for Public Libraries Promoting Literacy," which was prepared by Barbo Thomas, a Swedish librarian, under contract for IFLA. She drew on the proceedings of the 1989 and 1990 pre-conference seminars, particularly the one in Sweden, which she had helped plan. Many of her recommendations coincided with those made by Lucile Thomas, especially the need to work in concert with other organizations at the national, regional, and local levels. In her report Barbo Thomas also advocated

greater cooperation at the international level.

At the IFLA conference in Havana in 1994, Sissel Nilsen and Francis Kaiser proposed the creation of a new IFLA core program for literacy and reading promotion. Their plan was based on a previous proposal made by the Standing Committee on Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons. The new core program's aim would be to "promote the advancement of literacy in the world and promote reading skills through libraries, including support for literacy among young people and people with disabilities, thus ensuring everyone's right to know and helping to secure democracy throughout the world." The proposal was broadened to include the promotion and implementation of the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto and endorsed by the Professional Board. However, at a joint meeting of the IFLA Executive Board and Professional Board in 1995, the recommendation for the new core program was rejected on financial and organizational grounds. Instead it was decided to create a Literacy Working Group that would study the feasibility of a major IFLA initiative in support of literacy programs in libraries.

Also in 1995, the Professional Board agreed to establish a new Section on Reading, combining the Round Table on Research in Reading and the Round Table on Children's Literature Documentation Centres. Seven goals for the new Section are outlined in the final 1995 issue of the IFLA Journal. Although these goals emphasize reading promotion, research about reading, and work with children, three of these goals-interestingly enough-also concern literacy. Maybe someone had an eye on the future!

The Literacy Working Group held its organizational meeting at the IFLA conference in Beijing in 1996. It was charged by the Professional Board (PB Doc 95-111) to propose a policy and specific course of action by IFLA, over the long run, to support the promotion of literacy and the development of reading skills through libraries, including support for literacy among young people and people with disabilities and to support the "right to know." Several members of the Working Group met at The Hague in March 1997, and the group was reorganized. Irene Sever volunteered to be chair and Martin Kesselman volunteered to be secretary. It was agreed to undertake an international survey "to determine the current state of affairs of libraries and literacy and to have some baseline data on where we are today." The questionnaire was reviewed at the conference in Copenhagen in 1997, and in March 1998 the Professional Board approved additional funding to support the distribution and subsequent analysis of the questionnaire. At the 1998 Amsterdam conference the goal of the survey was changed: it was to become "a worldwide snapshot of the role libraries and library associations play with literacy programs rather than a country by country analysis." A progress report/financial report was made to the Professional Board in October 1998, and a market research consultant was contracted to help with the analysis of the survey results. This is the report that was presented to the Professional Board last summer in Bangkok. It was prepared by Working Group secretary Martin Kesselman, and consultant Dennis Blyth on behalf of the Working Group.

Based on its discussions, its review of IFLA activities and documents and the survey results, the Working Group made six major recommendations in its final report: 1) IFLA must advocate the major role libraries play in the promotion of literacy; 2) IFLA needs to continue to develop guidelines for libraries in promoting literacy activities; 3) IFLA should serve as a clearinghouse for literacy programs in libraries; 4) IFLA should provide leadership in the development and provision of continuing education and training manuals for libraries and, where needed, translations of these into various languages; 5)

IFLA should serve as a major communications channel for literacy programs in libraries; and 6) IFLA should have a major role in focusing research on libraries and literacy.

In order for IFLA to begin carrying out these recommendations, the Working Group recommended "that IFLA request funding by UNESCO for a full-time Literacy Officer for Libraries for a trial period of two to three years." The officer would work closely with several IFLA Standing Committees and other organizations, developing grants and project proposals. After a period of two years, "this position should be evaluated and at that time the need for a permanent Literacy Officer, the establishment of a new core program or the designation of literacy activities within another core program should be re-examined."

Literacy and Libraries

I now would like to step back and look at specific ways that libraries might become involved in literacy. First, it is useful to expand on the distinction between illiteracy, which is the inability to read, and what Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin in 1980 labeled as "aliteracy." An "aliterate" is a person who knows how to read but for various reasons, does not. Closely connected is the person who knows how to read but whose abilities are limited. Such persons, at least in the United States, often are labeled "functional illiterates." The solution to illiteracy, an education problem, is teaching someone how to read. The remedy for "aliteracy" is motivational: reacquainting, or in some cases "reconvincing" people about the power and satisfactions of reading. For "functional illiterates" the answer often involves both education and motivation.

UNESCO defines a literate person as someone who can with understanding both read and write a short simple sentence about his or her everyday life. However, as the IFLA Working Group's report points out, it is difficult to come up with a single definition for functional literacy, which can differ among countries, cultures, and time frames. My major point is that libraries can help in each instance and no matter which definition one uses. Libraries are, above all, community education resources and places. Through their collections and services they can stimulate literacy, help instruct, and motivate interest in books, reading, and lifetime learning.

The Working Group report outlines three areas in which libraries can assist literacy activities: providing collections in support of literacy, actively participating in instructional programs for learners, and providing support services for literacy efforts by the library and other organizations. Regarding IFLA's potential role, the report is a little ambiguous. It acknowledges that the traditional route would be for IFLA to work through library associations, performing, I assume, mostly an educational function. Yet the report also notes the effectiveness of many grassroots literacy programs and, I think, implies that direct connections between IFLA and such programs should be considered.

It is this latter route, working directly with literacy organizations, that I think we should emphasize. This approach takes into account and might even bring together two recent trends. The first is the broadening of the role of libraries into a community information centers, whether that community be a school, rural district, town or city, college or university, government agency, or an institution with a specialized clientele. The second trend is the expansion of the definition of literacy to include not only functional literacy, but also family literacy, information literacy, and even computer literacy. Moreover, library and

information services are being expanded to include literacy in its expanded forms. In every case, whether information is available in a book, newspaper, or on a screen, the ability to read is a basic survival skill. As the American Library Association's 1999 pamphlet 21st Century Literacy points out, new technologies are increasing, not decreasing, the importance of the ability to read. The new literacy encompasses what libraries do best: enable everyone, without cost, to obtain, interpret, and use information from print sources, computers, and other media.

Immediate Plans of the IFLA Section on Reading

I think it was logical for the Professional Board to turn the report of the Literacy Working Group over to the Section on Reading for review and incorporation, as best we can, into our program and action plan. The advantage is that for several years literacy as been specified as one of the Section on Reading's interests. Moreover there are close personal and organizational links between the Literacy Working Group and the Section on Reading. Valeria Stelmakh, the past Section chair and Irene Sever, a longtime member, both played important roles in the Literacy Working Group. A bibliography about literacy by Irene Sever has been one of the Section's long-standing projects.

The disadvantage, at least for those who wish that IFLA would move faster and in a bolder fashion, is that literacy is only one of the Section on Reading's several areas of interest. The others are reading promotion and development, promoting research, educating others about the broad field of reading and reading research, and a special concern about the role of reading in the lives of children and young people. These topics are not unrelated to literacy, but each has its own set of interests and, if you will, its own constituency.

Nevertheless the Section on Reading hopes to increase IFLA's interest in literacy and its importance . By necessity our efforts will be limited and focused on specific projects. We hope and trust, however, that the momentum will build and we think there is a good chance of this happening. But first we need the help of others in IFLA who share our belief-and the belief of the IFLA Literacy Working Group-that libraries have a major role to play in the worldwide reduction of illiteracy and in the promoting literacy generally.

The Section on Reading began including literacy as part of its IFLA programming in 1998. At the Amsterdam conference that year and again in Bangkok last year, the Section sponsored open sessions about reading promotion activities in the Netherlands and Southeast Asia, respectively, and both of these sessions included information about literacy as well as reading promotion projects. In Amsterdam we hosted a very successful all-day workshop on the topic "Literacy and Reading Services to Cultural and."Linguistic Minorities." It featured six presentations that combined research findings and descriptions of successful projects, a panel discussion among experts who work with minority language groups, and poster presentations describing literacy and reading projects from around the world. A booklet containing the papers is still available.

The Section on Reading also has expanded its newsletter to include more news about both reading promotion and literacy projects. A new column, "Current Research in Literacy and Reading," contains selected abstracts and descriptions of current research in the fields of reading and literacy. This column as well as the entire newsletter and other Section news can be found on IFLANET, the official IFLA Web site.

In Jerusalem, in addition to this program, we are sponsoring a workshop on "Library-Based Programs to Promote Literacy." The goal is to bring together librarians and other experts from several countries and regions to explore library-based programs for promoting literacy. We are interested in programs for both children and adults, as well in as the factors which make for a successful program, the sustainability of program, the training of staff, providing materials for new literates, and of course obtaining funding for literacy programs. Our objective is to work towards a program or workshop at the Boston conference in 2001 on developing guidelines for libraries in promoting literacy activities. Such guidelines, as pointed out in the Literacy Working Group's report, must be cooperative efforts involving several IFLA groups.

This leads me to a final point. The Section on Reading cannot perform this task alone. Partners are needed within IFLA, particularly from various Standing Committees, Sections, Round Tables, and , when appropriate, Core Programs. A valuable appendix in the Working Group's report lists the various literacy and literacy-related activities of IFLA's various standing committee and round tables during the past decade. It includes the expert meetings, seminars, workshops, projects, and publications. IFLA, this record shows, already is deeply involved with literacy as a topic and issue. Our problem, as I mentioned earlier, is the lack of a focal point. The Section on Reading cannot by itself be that focal point, but we can help through specific programs and projects and through trying to raise IFLA's awareness of the importance of the issue. More time is needed, but so is more help. As Section chair, I welcome participation in the programs we have planned and ideas from other IFLA unit heads about how we can work together. I also point out that on the literacy issue, IFLA also needs outside partners, including UNESCO, the World Bank, and other organizations concerned with literacy and education.

I will close with a quotation from the Literacy Working Group's report that succinctly describes both the importance of the issue and IFLA's possible future direction : "Literacy is an issue that touches all parts of our lives and is of concern to all libraries worldwide. Reading and its promotion as well as information seeking skills are and will continue to be critical skills for lifelong learning. A major thrust for literacy programs by IFLA and by libraries, with assistance and leadership from IFLA, can be a major catalyst for global change and have a positive impact on many levels-(including) education, health, and social and economic vitality."

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Latest Revision: *May 9, 2000*

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